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News Release



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SERVICE DESIGNATES CRITICAL HABITAT FOR ENDANGERED RIVERSIDE FAIRY SHRIMP

Complying with a court order, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today it is designating approximately 6,870 acres of land in San Diego, Orange, Riverside, Los Angeles, and Ventura counties as critical habitat for the endangered Riverside fairy shrimp, a small vernal pool crustacean unique to southern California.

Critical habitat identifies geographic areas that are essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and which may require special management considerations. The designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, reserve, wilderness, preserve, or other conservation area. It does not allow government or public access to private lands and does not close areas to all access or use. Rather, its sole impact is that Federal agencies must consult with the Service on activities they undertake, fund, authorize, or permit that may affect critical habitat.

The areas designated as critical habitat include 880 acres of Federal lands managed by the Department of Defense and the Immigration and Naturalization Service, about 1,875 acres of State or local jurisdiction lands, and 4,115 acres of private land. Most of the private land included in the critical habitat designation is on the Santa Rosa Plateau Ecological Reserve, which is owned and managed by The Nature Conservancy.

“The Service made the final critical habitat determination after reviewing all public comments on the proposed rule and completing an economic analysis of the impacts associated with designating lands as critical habitat,” said Michael J. Spear, Manager of the Service’s California/Nevada Operations Office.

The Service proposed to designate approximately 12,060 acres of critical habitat for the Riverside fairy shrimp last September. Based upon comments and information received during two public comment periods, the Service excluded about 5,190 acres of land from the final determination.

Lands within Marine Corps Air Station, Miramar, were excluded because the Marine Corps has completed an Integrated Natural Resource Management Plan that provides for conservation, management and protection for vernal pools and the Riverside fairy shrimp on the Air Station. The Service also excluded military training areas on Marine Corps Base, Camp Pendleton based upon comments received from the Marine Corps regarding impacts the designation of critical habitat would have on mission-critical activities on Camp Pendleton. Approximately 770 acres of non-training land on Camp Pendleton are included as critical habitat for the fairy shrimp.

One vernal pool complex in Orange County was also excluded from the final designation because new information indicated the pool had been removed during construction of the San Antonio Parkway.

The critical habitat designation does not include lands within the boundaries of approved and implemented habitat conservation plans (HCPs) where the Riverside fairy shrimp is a covered species and for which an incidental take permit has been issued.

Although the Orange County Central/Coastal HCP is approved and operating, lands within this HCP have been included as critical habitat because natural, high-quality vernal pool complexes within this area are only conditionally covered by the HCP. These vernal pool complexes are essential to the conservation of the Riverside fairy shrimp and are included in the critical habitat designation.

The designation of the critical habitat for the Riverside fairy shrimp should not impede ongoing efforts to develop and implement new HCPs in southern California, including the Western Riverside County Multiple Species HCP and the North San Diego County Subarea HCP.

Although the Service is designating 6,870 acres as critical habitat for the fairy shrimp, not all the areas within those broad boundaries contain the primary constituent elements to support the species. When mapping each of the critical habitat units, Service biologists attempted to exclude developed areas such as roads, buildings and agricultural fields because these areas do not support habitat for the Riverside fairy shrimp. However, they were unable to exclude all developed areas from the critical habitat designation.

Vernal pools are seasonal wetlands that fill with water during fall and winter rains. They are home to many plants and animals that, in turn, form a valuable part of the food chain for a wide array of animals, including birds of prey, shorebirds, migratory waterfowl, frogs, toads, salamanders and pollinating insects. Once abundant throughout most of the Central Valley and coastal areas of southern California, vernal pools have declined significantly as a result of urban development and agricultural conversion, alterations of vernal pool hydrology, off-road vehicle activity, livestock overgrazing and other activities.

The Riverside fairy shrimp (*Streptocephalus woottoni*) is a small aquatic crustacean that is generally visible in shallow pools from January through March. Riverside fairy shrimp have a red-colored tail and are approximately 0.5 to 1 inch in length. Female fairy shrimp have a brood pouch extending along the abdomen. The species has a short life cycle, hatching and maturing within 7 to 14 days, depending on water temperature. The Riverside fairy shrimp was listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act as amended on August 3, 1993.

A lawsuit filed against the Service by the Center for Biological Diversity contended the Service was in violation of section 4 of the Act, which requires a determination of critical habitat at the time a species is listed. Today's announcement is in response to an order issued on February 15, 2000, by the Federal District Court for the Northern District of California, to make a final determination of critical habitat for the Riverside fairy shrimp by May 1, 2001. This date has been extended to May 22, 2001.

A complete description of the Service's designation of critical habitat for the Riverside fairy shrimp will be published in the *Federal Register* on May 30, 2001 and will take effect 30 days after the date of publication. Copies of the final rule, final economic analysis, and other information can be downloaded from the Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office's website at <http://carlsbad.fws.gov>. Requests for copies of the final rule and economic analysis should be submitted to Field Supervisor, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office, 2730 Loker Avenue West, Carlsbad, CA 92008, or by calling 760/431-9440.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 94-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses more than 535 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 70 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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